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ABSTRACT

Current thought about the effects of single-parenting on children's sex-role development has supported (1) the traditional view that being raised in a single-parent home is deleterious to the well-being of children; (2) the conditional view noting that differences exist between children in father-absent and father-present homes (but only in particular situations or only in a subset of single-parent children); and (3) the conservative view that the literature is too inconsistent to draw sound conclusions. Application of Hedges' (1982) meta-analytic techniques to the literature indicates that for females no clear evidence exists for effects due to father-absence. Preschool father-absent boys made less stereotypical choices of toys and activities when compared to father-present age mates. They also were likely to have less masculine scores on projective measures, particularly those assumed to measure identification with father. Older father-absent boys showed more stereotypical overt behavior, especially aggression, when compared to father-present boys. Thus, the meta-analysis supports the conditional view. Future research concerning the relationship between single-parenting and the sex-role development of offspring must consider both the questionable usefulness of the father-absence paradigm and implications of the fact that sex-typing is multidimensional. (Author/RH)

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The Effects of Single-Parenting on Sex-Role Development: The State of the Art

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Abstract

This paper considered current thought on the issue of the effects of single-parenting on sex-role development. Although this issue has been addressed numerous times, previous authors have been unable to reach consensus. The positions these authors have taken vary widely. However, they can be roughly categorized into three groups. Some who supported the traditional view that being raised in a single-parent home is deleterious to the well-being of children. Others who supported the conditional view, noted that differences occurred but only in particular situations or only in a subset of single-parent children. Finally, some supported the conservative view that the literature is too inconsistent to draw sound conclusions. These alternative views were described and their origins discussed.

The reviews cited exemplify many of the problems with the traditional review. These concerns provided an appropriate rationale for the use of meta-analytic techniques in a comprehensive review of the literature. The results of the meta-analysis were summarized and compared to the conclusions drawn by previous authors.

Implications of these findings for single-parent families were discussed. The benefits of the use of meta-analytic techniques were considered. Recommendations for further reconceptualization and more rigorous research with single-parent families were offered.

The Effects of Single-Parenting on Sex-Role Development: The State of the Art[1]

Historically, research concerning the effects of single-parenting has been addressed by employing the father-absence paradigm. This was probably due both to the theoretical importance of a present father and to the fact that when a parent is absent, it is much more likely to be the father. Due to the nature of the literature, this paper focuses on what the father-absence literature tells us about the sex-role development of children who a reared by a single-parent mother.

The literature addressing the relationship between father's absence and the sex-role development of children has been reviewed and discussed numerous times. However, previous authors have been unable to reach consensus (Stevenson, 1984; Stevenson and Black, 1985a). The positions taken by these authors vary widely. However, they be roughly categorized into three groups that we have chosen to label the traditional view, the conditional view, and the conservative view. Those who support the traditional view, most notably Biller (1974, 1982) and Lynn (1974), concluded that being raised in a father-absent family is deleterious to the well-being of children. Those who support the conditional position, including Hetherington (1979) and Parke (1981), suggest that father-absence is deterimental to a subset of children in particular situations. Finally, notable reviews by Herzog and Sudia (1968, 1971, 1973) and Kohlberg (1966) support a more conservative view that the literature is too inconsistent to draw sound conclusions. In

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[1]This paper was based, in part, on research completed in collaboration with Kathryn N. Black, Purdue University. Those interested in more detailed discussion of these issues are referred to Stevenson and Black (1985a) and Stevenson and Black (1985b).

fact, Herzog and Sudia compared this literature to a projective device, "inviting the imposition of form and structure dictated by the predispositions of the analyst rather than by the data" (1971, p. 184).

This disparity is due in part to changes in the conceptualization of sex-typing. When father-absence research began, masculinity and femininity were thought to be opposite ends of the same continuum. As a result, if a child did not exhibit masculine behavior, the child was by definition feminine. This conceptualization may have encouraged researchers to reason that since some father-absent boys made fewer masculine choices of toys or activities, they were exhibiting a feminine behavior pattern.

Later, a multi-level conception of sex-role development emerged. This conceptualization contrasts surface level behavior and cognitions with an underlying or unconscious level of sex-role identity (Pleck, 1981). This distinction made it possible to reconcile seemingly contradictory evidence. For example, reviewers have concluded that when compared to father-present boys, father-absent boys were both less masculine and more masculine. That is, they were less masculine in their responses to projective measures of sex-role development while being more masculine in their overt behavior. The boys were assumed to be compensating in their overt behavior for a basically feminine, underlying orientation.

A more recent conception suggests that masculinity and femininity are independent dimensions rather than opposite poles of the same dimension (Pleck 1981). That is, individuals can possess both masculine

and feminine characteristics and therefore be classified as androgynous. The androgynous conception of sex-role development has led to a reanalysis of earlier assumptions. Reviewers (e.g. Parke, 1981) reflect this conception when they suggest that being less stereotyped need not be indicative of pathology.

The importance of having a clear understanding of what this research tells us becomes evident when considering that in 1982 more than 8 million families in the United States were headed by a single parent ("Single Parent," 1983). Furthermore, Glick (1979) has estimated that by 1990 fifty percent of children will reside in a one-parent home for some time before they reach the age of 18 years.

Beyond its theoretical importance, and its importance in understanding a substantial minority of individuals, this literature has had far reaching social implications. In the past, such research has had an impact on child custody decisions (Lemkin, 1944). Anecdotal evidence shows that such research is still being used as evidence in custody proceedings even though this practice is not advocated at the present time (Gardner, 1982; Santrock, Warshak & Elliot, 1982). This research is important for those involved in therapy and counseling with father-absent children and their families (Bourdain & Henggeler, 1982; Herzo & Sudia, 1973). As well, it appears to have impact on social policy toward single parents (Biller, 1974; Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Feldman, 1979; Emery, Hetherington, & Dilalla, 1984).

Finally, a clear understanding of this literature may help to correct potentially erroneous assumptions that many hold about the

effects of single-parenting (MacKay, Wilding, & George, 1972). Ferri (1976) has argued that these assumptions may be as harmful to single-parent children as any direct effects the absence of a father may cause. Emery, Hetherington, and Dilalla (1984) have recently suggested that public views may in fact determine whether or not divorce is detrimental to children.

A meta-analysis of this literature has been completed (Stevenson, 1984; Stevenson & Black, 1985b). Meta-analytic techniques were chosen for use in this review because they are particularly well suited for the review of literature when findings appear to be inconsistent (Glass, McGaw & Smith, 1981). By employing meta-analytic techniques, we can consider not only whether or not a significant difference was found but also the magnitude of such differences. Furthermore, such analyses allow a researcher to systematically describe an effect that may be present in a subset of experiments employing participants or methods with particular attributes.

The meta-analytic techniques employed here were those developed by Hedges (1982a, 1982b, 1982c). The use of these methods is statistically more appropriate than the use of standard inferential statistics commonly applied in meta-analyses (see Stevenson & Black, 1985c for comparison). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed description of the meta-analysis, the results will be summarized and compared to those offered by other reviewers.

This meta-analysis made use of a number of general classifications that help to explain inconsistencies among past reviews. For example,

in studies of males it is apparent that published studies produced different results than unpublished studies and that males drawn from atypical samples, such as clinics and detention centers, behave differently than other boys from less select groups. Therefore, reviewers who have based their reviews on studies of atypical samples or have restricted their review to the published literature may have unknowingly biased their conclusions.

It is apparent from the meta-analysis (Stevenson, 1984; Stevenson & Black, 1985b) that for females there is no clear evidence for effects that could be attributed to father-absence. This is consistent with the conclusions drawn by most other reviewers.

In contrast, for males, there were a number of significant differences between the father-absent and the father-present groups for some measures at some ages. Specifically, it was found that pre-school father-absent boys made less stereotypical choices of toys and activities when compared to father-present age mates. They were also likely to have less masculine scores on projective measures, particularly those assumed to measure identification with father. In the past these findings have been taken as evidence that father-absent boys were unmasculine. Finally, older father-absent boys showed more stereotypical overt behavior, especially aggression, when compared to father-present boys.

The meta-analysis supported the conditional view that under particular circumstances father-absent boys may behave differently than father-present boys. Furthermore, the interpretation of these findings

was in line with Parke's (1981) position that differences need not be considered as indicative of deficiencies. For example, it might be suggested that a lesser preference for toys stereotyped as masculine does not necessarily indicate maladjustment in males. It is also possible that increased aggressiveness in males for whom a parent has either died or whose parents have divorced could be interpreted as due to psychological processes other than compensatory over-masculinization.

Several additional factors may have contributed to the disparity between reviewers of this literature. It seems probable that reviewers and researchers, as members of society, are influenced by the assumptions implicit in that society. Our society appears to assume that one-parent is incapable of preforming the role our society allocates to two parents (Ferri, 1976). It has also been argued that researchers are more influenced by their theoretical expectations and paradigms than their empirical findings (Stevenson & Black, 1982; Fleck, 1981).

It is clear that this paradigm grossly oversimplifies a rather complex situation. Samples of "father-absent" children often include those who see their fathers regularly (Earl & Lohman, 1978). On the other hand, father-present individuals may also include children who have little contact with their fathers (Fleck, Fuller, Malin, Miller, & Acheson, 1980).

It is obvious that the empirically possible variability arising from the use of the two gross classifications makes it difficult to interpret any differences that may in fact be found. Alternatively, it

is possible to make use of measures of father involvement. For example, Pederson, Rubenstein, and Yarrow (1979) used a measure of father contact in their study of infant development in father-absent families. The amount of father-infant interaction proved to be a better predictor of infant functioning than the more global classification of father-absence versus father-presence.

A number of measures of father involvement appropriate for use with older participants are presently available. The Father Scale (Cooper, 1966) was developed to assess parent quality. One subscale of this instrument, the warmth scale, has been shown to discriminate between children from intact families and children of divorce (Fine, Moreland, and Schwebel, 1983). The Parent Child Relationship Survey (Fine, Moreland, and Schwebel, 1983) was developed to assess the participants perception of their current relationship with their parents. This scale has also been shown to discriminate between children of intact families and children of divorce (Fine et al., 1983). The Commitment to Parent Scale, developed by Johnson (1981) has been shown to discriminate between participants who have experienced parental death and those from intact families (Stevenson & Black, 1984). Finally, the quality of a relationship can also be described in terms of closeness (Troll & Bergston, 1982). In the absence of an objective measure of this construct, one is presently being developed (Stevenson, 1985).

The father-absence paradigm has also been used to make inferences about the influence of the father on sex-role development of offspring. Pederson (1976) argued that the father-absence paradigm does not produce

evidence concerning the influence of fathers. He argued that such a drastic alteration in family structure also produces other changes in the family. In addition, the use of the father-absence paradigm for this purpose implies that father-absence must necessarily be deterimental, since the present father's influence on child development is often assumed to be positive. Pederson (1976) concluded that "the conventional father-absence research paradigm has outlived its usefulness. In place of a deficit-oriented, global classification of environments, research should be directed to the study and conceptualization of the more specific components of experience in the nuclear family" (p. 463).

Finally, in addition to being deficit oriented, the father absence paradigm implicitly emphasizes family structure and therefore fails to consider family process variables that are likely to be more important to family functioning. In order to make significant advances in our knowledge we must shift from our structural orientation and instead emphasize process variables (Emery, Hetherington & Dillala, 1984).

Problems in this literature are not restricted to the "father-absence" construct, our definition of sex-role development is also open to criticism. Sex-role development has commonly been defined in terms of sex-typed personality traits in adults and a sex-typed toy and activity preference in children. Huston (1983) has convincingly argued that sex-typing is multi-dimensional and that generally speaking, research has programatically considered only a few of these dimensions.

Gender-based social relationships is one aspect of sex-typing that

has drawn little attention but may be particularly important in single-parent homes. It is commonly assumed that children who experience the breakup of their parents relationship will have difficulty establishing committed relationships of their own (e.g., Littner, 1985). This assumption is supported in part by psychoanalytic theorists. Others have considered it as an explanation for why children of divorced parents are somewhat more likely to divorce (Pope & Mueller, 1976). Generally speaking, few studies address this issue directly (Stevenson & Black, 1985c). Therefore, little empirical evidence in available on which to base conclusions.

A second related issue concerns parental influence on the development of gender-appropriate behavior toward the other gender. Hetherington's (1972) well known study showed that both daughters of divorcees and daughters of widows felt insecure around male peers and adults. However, this insecurity was displayed behaviorally in very different ways. Daughters of divorcees sought more attention from males while daughters of widows appeared to avoid interaction with males. Hainline and Feig (1978) attempted to replicate Hetherington's (1972) observations in a sample of college women but did not find the differences Hetherington reported. Although there are several plausible explanations for the inconsistencies among these findings, all are merely speculation. The necessity of further research concerning the behavior of single-parent children in their heterosexual relationships is clear.

In summary, future research concerning the relationship between single-parenting and the sex-role development of offspring must consider at least two important issues. In the first place, the usefulness of continual reliance on the father-absence paradigm must be thoughtfully considered. It is clear that such gross classifications are misleading and that they are implicitly tied to a structural orientation. In the second place, sex-role researchers must reconsider the conceptual framework within which we work. It is clear that sex-typing is multidimensional. Therefore, it is inappropriate to generalize about masculinity and femininity from measures of more specific aspects of sex-role. The alternative, the adoption of a process oriented multi-dimensional approach, is both attractive and viable. In comparison, this approach is also more likely to lead to a better understanding of the effects of single-parenting on sex-role development.

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